

WEEDS AND WHEAT

Why are there so many weeds in the world? And why are they so hardy, hard to pull, hard to get rid of? Weeds have a way of invading where I don't want them. That's what makes them weeds, because they are growing where I don't want them, in the lawn and among the plants and bushes. So it is in Jesus' parable—the weeds are growing amidst the wheat.

That's how it is in the world, in the church, and in ourselves. What shall we do about the weeds? If weeds are evil, then we must rout them out, search and destroy. That's what the farmhands in the parable want to do. They want to uproot the weeds from the wheat. But, their master farmer says that no weeding will be done until harvesttime. Now, if this parable were a lesson in agriculture we could argue about the farmer's methods. Won't the weeds tend to choke out the wheat, diminishing the wheat's yield, and won't millions of weed seeds guarantee a bumper crop of unwanted weeds next year? Is this any way to run a farm? That's the surprise, upside-down nature of the parable.

In our world, in our culture, we are intent upon annihilating the weeds—and I'm not talking just agriculture. I'm talking about everything and everyone that we judge to be bad, evil, wicked. We want to kill the bad and preserve the good. Our favorite way of doing this is through violence. In our movies, video games, comic books and politics, we honor the myth of redemptive violence. We put our trust, our money, and the lives of our sons and daughters into the machine of redemptive violence. Virtually every week we hear of men and women who strap bombs to their bodies or hide them in a vehicle and then proceed to blow up themselves and everyone and everything around them. They believe they are punishing evil doers and their bloody violence will lead to good. They murder and destroy in the name of God—in Palestine and Israel, London and New York, Iraq and Afghanistan. The supposedly Christian Serbs, who slaughtered some 8,000 Muslim men in Srebrenica, raped women, and beat children were doing so for the good of greater Serbia and in the name of their Christian God. Redemptive violence. Routing out the weeds. Seizing the throne of God.

Our reading from Isaiah reminds us there is no god other than the LORD God. "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. . . . Is there any other god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one."

As Paul says,

so then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors to this God. We are God's children, now. We did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but we have received a spirit of adoption. In hope we have been saved. Therefore, we are to live as children of God, according to the Spirit of God, even in the midst of suffering, for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, so that the creation may be set free from its bondage to sin and decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Not redemption through violence, but redemption through the way of God, living according to the Spirit of God. Violence prompts retribution and more violence. Uprooting the weeds in the wheat is dangerous business. Acting as if we were God is a hazardous pursuit. God is judge, not us. God conducts the harvest, not us. The Parable of the Weeds suggests that we leave the weed pulling to God. I wish it worked that way in my garden. So it is, perhaps, hard to believe that it will work in this world of sin. Just how much patience and forbearance does God expect of us? I'm not sure. The parable suggests that when we root out the weeds, in the process we destroy lots of wheat. In fact, as we know, what might be called a "weed" in one location serves as a desirable plant in another. Let God be God. When we play God, taking into our own hands the powers of death, we destroy life, so that in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and now in Libya, we destroy far more non-combatant citizens than enemy terrorists. Did you know that? It is true. Whatever is the best way to deal with evil in this world—the weeds growing amidst the wheat—it does not appear to work well when we make ourselves judge and avenger.

This parable does not pretend to have the answer for evil in the world. But it does suggest that we quit pretending we are God and judge. Yes, there are weeds in this world. The problem is: they grow in our own bodies and souls. Jesus says,

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?

What does Jesus say to the religious elite, to the virtuous in all their judgmental self-righteousness?

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside are full of bones and rotten flesh. So, on the outside you look righteous but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

"Let the weeds and the wheat grow together until the harvest." The word here translated as "let" or "permit" elsewhere we translate as "forgive"—as in "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." It is the same word that Jesus speaks from the cross: "Father, forgive them."

We children of God are to let God be God. We are to live in the holy faith, in the gracious way of God, doing good as God enables. In this complicated world, where weeds grow amidst the wheat, and where we often look much like weeds, let us remember the way of Jesus: "In everything do unto others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."

To God Alone Be Glory.

Amen.